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Introduction

1.1 Accountability – a fuzzy concept and its importance for partnerships

Accountability. Oh no, I don't know that I can. [...] I guess some of us, when we think of that [...] word we understand the importance of checks and balances. We understand that there are some things that – where accountability is near instantaneous, and that there are other things where there are grey areas and it's much less difficult. But what it means, very simply, is to – to me, anyway – is that people understandably look to individuals, who have responsibilities, to be accountable for the conduct of those responsibilities. [...] you need to put in place a series of things that hold people reasonably accountable for their actions, and people, I think, expect that.

US Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld when asked about how he would define accountability (Council on Foreign Relations, 2004)

'Accountability' has become a prominent political catchword. The term serves as a rallying cry for civil society organisations aiming to control the actions of governments, international organisations and corporations,¹ and is used by those who want to create a positive image for their organisation² as well as those attacking their opponents for irresponsible behaviour.

Yet – as is often the case with political buzzwords – Donald Rumsfeld is not the only one who finds it difficult to put his finger on what exactly the term means. As Mark Bovens put it so aptly:

As a concept, however, 'public accountability' is rather elusive. It is a hurrahword, like 'learning,' 'responsibility,' or 'solidarity' – nobody can be against it. It is one of those evocative political words that can be used to patch up a rambling argument, to evoke an image of trustworthiness, fidelity, and justice, or to keep critics at bay.

(Bovens, 2005, p. 182)³

In addition, understandings about accountability vary between the public, private and civil society sectors,⁴ adding to the conceptual confusion. Governments and public administrations, the business sector and increasingly also the non-profit sector each have their own distinct accountability traditions.

The discourse and practice of accountability in the public sector, for example, has developed in the context of representative democracy. Democratic governments around the world have espoused the same basic institutional structure, comprising a legislative, an independent judiciary and an executive. Each of these institutions has a range of typical accountability mechanisms. These mechanisms either allow for direct citizen control or work through a system of checks and balances.⁵

Corporate accountability in its classical form has three distinct layers. Firstly, societies use legal and fiscal rules and their enforcement to hold corporations accountable for conforming to social norms and contributing to social goals. Secondly, consumers use market mechanisms to create accountability for product quality and price. Thirdly, owners use a variety of mechanisms treated in the corporate governance literature to induce managers to maximise returns.

Questions of accountability of non-profit organisations have gained prominence concurrent with the recent rise in power of these organisations. But while the debate has intensified, it is far from reaching a consensus. It is not only disputed who NGOs should become more accountable to or for what but also whether more accountability is desirable at all. In addition, the debate has largely remained theoretical and many of the recommendations have not (yet?) been translated into practice. Currently, NGOs are mainly accountable to public authorities, their donors and their members.

Most contributions to the literature on accountability are specific to one of these sectors, even though increasing efforts were made over recent years to apply the concepts and experiences from one sector to another. Reflecting the fact that accountability arrangements are often highly complex, many contributions focus on specific subgroups of agents and individual accountability mechanisms.⁶

In the debate about partnerships, the issue of accountability is particularly salient. Partnerships are cooperative arrangements between international institutions, governments, corporations and civil society organisations to address pressing local and international policy problems.⁷ As the ability of traditional nation states to address complex questions has increasingly come under question and as states are transforming, partnerships have emerged in many areas as a promising mechanism for defining and implementing complex and controversial policies. Partnerships now address urgent problems ranging from regulating the technical aspects of the Internet to enhancing the social responsibility of companies and providing remedies to

global health crises. Prominent examples of partnerships at the global level include the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI),⁸ a partnership that develops and disseminates standards to guide the sustainability reporting practices of companies and other organisations, and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria,⁹ a global initiative to raise additional resources for the fight against these diseases.¹⁰

Since partnerships routinely include actors from the public, corporate and civil society sectors, we cannot simply rely on any one established accountability system. Defining concepts and effective mechanisms of accountability is therefore even more complex for partnerships than for more traditional institutions. This complexity renders partnerships an interesting object of study for analysing different understandings, implications and new developments of accountability. A focus on partnership accountability also has the potential to generate insights for the discourse on the accountability of other institutions.

Moreover, most principled objections against partnerships are based on concerns about accountability. These criticisms imply that by shifting policy decisions to partnerships, governments can circumvent control by their domestic constituencies and international institutions can weaken control by member states.¹¹

Corporations for their part are accused of using partnerships to improve their reputation without significantly changing their management and operational practices.¹² Thus they evade public pressure for moving towards more sustainable practices and counteract the drive for binding regulations.¹³ At the same time, shareholders may criticise companies for their partnership activities because they are costly and (at least in the short term) inefficient.

NGOs or other civil society organisations, finally, can be seen as risking, being co-opted and losing their critical edge by participating in cross-sectoral partnerships. Moreover, large NGOs that have the capacity to partner with other institutions may be tempted to claim they represent constituencies that do not actually have any influence over the NGO's policies and activities.¹⁴

These critiques have a common denominator. They fear that partnerships reduce the accountability of the participating organisations without creating alternative accountability mechanisms.¹⁵ If validated, these critiques would seriously undermine the credibility and legitimacy of partnerships as a mechanism to address public policy problems.¹⁶ This has also been recognised by the supporters of partnerships. In unison with many partnership critics, many of them now demand that partnerships should become (more) accountable.¹⁷

But, for the most part, the demand for accountability has remained general. It is rarely explained why exactly partnerships should be accountable, let alone what this would entail in practice.¹⁸ Acar and Robertson

confirm this gap in the literature and debate: ‘The question of accountability in multi-organizational networks and partnerships has not been adequately addressed in the literature’ (Acar and Robertson, 2004, p. 332).

Given how central the question of accountability is to the success of the partnership approach to public policy, a carefully differentiated conceptual and normative understanding of partnership accountability is critical.

1.2 Purpose and structure

This study aims to add to our conceptual and normative understanding of accountability by providing a unified model of accountability that can, beyond partnerships, also be applied to more traditional accountability debates in the public, private and civil society sectors. Moreover, its purpose is to add to the debate on and practice of partnerships by defining concrete and consistent standards for partnership accountability.¹⁹

Both ‘partnership’ and ‘accountability’ are political buzzwords. As such, they lack clear and broadly accepted definitions. To avoid building normative castles on conceptual quicksand, this book takes five steps for defining accountability standards for partnerships. These steps and the corresponding chapter numbers are illustrated in Figure 1.1.

- Defining terms and clarifying concepts:
To prepare the ground for empirical analysis and normative reflections on partnership accountability, this study begins with a discussion of the two terms at the centre of enquiry.
Chapter 2 proposes a working definition of the term ‘partnership’ that will be used throughout the study. To clarify exactly what the term denotes, it is compared and contrasted with other definitions and related concepts, namely networks and corporatism.
To provide a clear understanding of the term ‘accountability’, the same chapter traces this concept to its theoretical roots in principal-agent

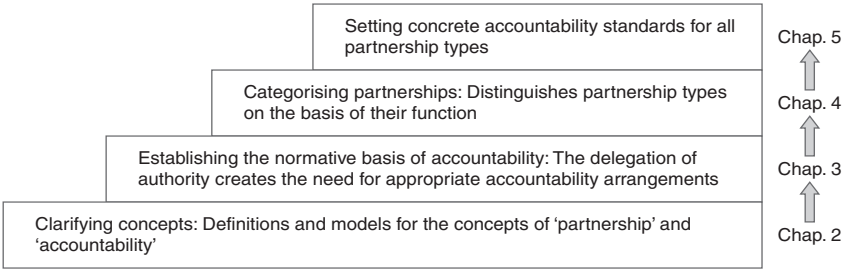


Figure 1.1 Structure of the argument

theory. It proposes a basic model illustrating the general workings of accountability relationships and analyses what this means in practice. The chapter also explores the contradictions between different kinds of accountability, underlining the fact that organisations need to choose carefully which accountability arrangements to adopt.

- Establishing the normative core of accountability:

Having delineated the subject of this study, Chapter 3 begins the normative enquiry. It asks what gives the concept of accountability its normative impetus or why we believe that organisations ought to be accountable.

To answer these questions, the chapter begins with a review of the relevant literature. Several different justifications for accountability have been proposed in different fields, but none of them is found fully satisfactory. Therefore, the study goes on to develop its own argument. This alternative account is based on mainstream ideas in legal, political and economic theory, as well as liberal political and moral philosophy. It suggests that it is the delegation of authority – be it explicit or implicit, ex-ante, ex-post or hypothetical – that creates the need for appropriate accountability arrangements. The chapter then takes the normative argument further. It asks which properties determine when an accountability arrangement is appropriate. Based on the argument that the need for accountability is grounded in delegation, it makes the case that an organisation's function is key for deciding which type of accountability the organisation should espouse.

- Categorisation:

The abstract principles developed in Chapter 3 need to be applied to the reality of partnerships. Chapter 4 relies on a range of partnership examples and clusters them into four categories, distinguished by their main function.

- Defining concrete accountability standards for different partnership types:

Chapter 5 develops concrete accountability standards for each of the four groups of partnerships. The chapter first takes the main function of each partnership group and analyses what authority is needed to exercise that function. To determine necessary accountability principles and standards, it then refers to and adapts standard accountability practices and commonly accepted normative expectations relating to accountability in functionally similar organisations.